

Inside Report . . . *Post 3/4/65* By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

LBJ and the Peace Bloc

LYNDON B. Johnson's circuitous method of handling Congress, consistently triumphant as both Senate Majority Leader and President, backfired over Viet-Nam—with very nearly disastrous results.

After much effort, President Johnson has toned down a revolt against the Vietnamese war by the peace bloc of Democratic Senators. But much of the blame for the revolt must be placed on the President. And that revolt, in a sense, has weakened the Administration's position on Viet-Nam.

All this shows that Mr. Johnson's patented government by indirection is not universally successful. In handling Congress, he always has gained leverage by not committing himself until the last possible moment. In the case of Viet-Nam, this technique nearly proved his undoing.

HIS PROBLEMS began Jan. 4 when the new Congress convened. On that morning Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield of Montana, addressing a closed-door Democratic caucus, urged Democratic Senators to provoke a Vietnamese debate on the Senate floor.

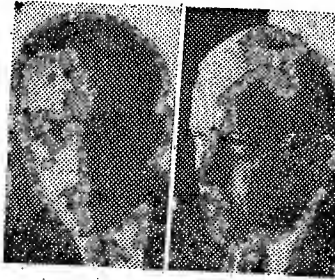
Considering Sen. Mansfield's well-known distaste for U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia, his plea was interpreted by Senators as an attempt to disengage the U.S. from Viet-Nam.

One Senator who responded to Mansfield's call was Idaho's Frank Church. In speeches and magazine articles, Church made clear that he wanted to lead a great debate aimed at U.S. withdrawal from Viet-Nam.

Simultaneously, Sen. Richard Russell of Georgia, an LBJ intimate, was telling colleagues that Viet-Nam was all but lost. Another Senate veteran, close to Russell, was saying privately: "The white man has no future in Southeast Asia."

Other Senators began to put two and two together and get five.

THEY REASONED that Mansfield and Russell must



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have a green light from the White House. They reasoned that Church, noted for a total lack of daring during eight years here, never would swim upstream against the prevailing political tide. Thus, the word was passed in Senate cloak-rooms that the President was about to desert Viet-Nam.

In fact, he wasn't accepting sage advice from aides throughout the government. He was slowly deciding to accelerate—not end—the Viet-Nam effort. But in the indirect LBJ manner, he refused to show his hand, even to Democratic Senators. The result was Senate speeches, led by Church, demanding a negotiated settlement.

Then and only then did Mr. Johnson reveal his true intentions. The day after Church's major speech, McGeorge Bundy—the President's assistant for international affairs—was dispatched to Capitol Hill. Meeting secretly in Vice President Humphrey's office, Bundy laid down the law to the peace bloc Senators. Mr. Johnson did not approve of Church's peace offensive.

Now the President him-

self got busy. He urged Connecticut's Sen. Thomas Dodd, an old friend, to hurry up a planned speech calling for a hard line in Viet-Nam. When Wyoming's Sen. Gale McGee (like Church, a young western liberal) blasted the Church position, he got a call of encouragement from the White House. To members of the peace bloc, Mr. Johnson supplied copious arguments and secret defense information about Viet-Nam.

The rebellion quieted—but did not end. Because they had committed themselves so strongly, peace bloc Senators could not retreat completely.

IN PARTICULAR, Church had painted himself into a corner. After a toe-to-toe argument with the President at the White House last week, Church returned to Capitol Hill arguing—incredibly—that Mr. Johnson really did not object to the peace bloc's stand. Church even tried to entice one liberal Democratic Senator, silent about Viet-Nam so far, into joining him.

So, Democratic ranks in Congress remain divided (though not nearly so badly divided as before Mr. Johnson started his arm-twisting) on the world's most troublesome issue.

This could have been avoided. It is hard to imagine Frank Church heeding Mike Mansfield's plea to debate Viet-Nam if the President's position had been clear on Jan. 4. Indeed, it's doubtful whether Mansfield even would have made the plea.

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